

FOLLOW ME TO THE GRAVEYARD



PREFACE

Once every semester, on a day when the weather is seasonably or unseasonably propitious (depending on the term), I will surprise my freshman composition students by taking them off campus and marching them as a body down through the center of town, to the little Walloon Churchyard on Huguenot Street, where the founding families of New Paltz are buried. Though all freshmen are required to live on campus, it is a great exception when any of the students have so much as walked past the cemetery before, as it lies some two or three blocks off the Main Street bar-route. There is no absolute learning objective on these days (in my class, there rarely is); I simply give them a little history of the place, tell them to poke around it on their own for a while, then find a quiet spot to sit and write about whatever the surroundings bring to mind. Never since I began the tradition has what I have begun calling “Graveyard Day” failed to be the most memorable and constructive session of the semester. By bringing the troop of eighteen and nineteen year-olds into a direct and unexpected encounter with mortality and local history, it very often seems that I am forcing them to confront matters in writing that they have rarely or never contemplated before, much less committed to the page. For the remainder of the semester, our journey out of time and into the graveyard becomes a central point of reference for all discussions of life, death, time, faith, nationality, and so on. For so seemingly small a thing, its proportions in relation to the usual routine become inescapable. The pieces I have collected from my students on these excursions have

consisted of poetry, meditations on decay, philosophical and religious speculations, and eulogies for lost friends or relatives, with at least one student undertaking to compose his own epitaph. And though I am often to be found writing along with my students in the classroom, for some reason that now escapes my reasoning, I have yet to bring a pad and pen with me to the graveyard, and have never produced my own response to “Graveyard Day.”

The present tract, predominantly composed while in a large graveyard some two miles from my residence, is intended on some level to compensate for these unwritten responses, while doubly serving as a summary introduction to a number of the less obscure aspects of Memorialism, a sort of *Weltanschauung* that I have been engaged in developing (consciously or unconsciously) since I was about the age of my typical student. There may be elements of my thought that are owed to previous thinkers (Heidegger and Schopenhauer, for instance) to whom I pay no direct reference, and for these I must beg your indulgence, as I conceived that the naming of too many names would only serve to further weigh down an already overburdened sketch.

-DTT

Hyde Park, New York

14 July 2014



FOLLOW ME TO THE GRAVEYARD

I hope you will not object, my dear friend, to a leisurely stroll with an eccentric companion, during which I beg leave - in my own meandering and indeterminate way - to discourse with you upon a few points regarding which, on less commodious occasions, you have seemed anxious to raise inquiry. For I recall that once, while we were among some decidedly unphilosophical company, and you and I had found each other sitting shoulder-to-shoulder as we always seem to do, that I attempted to introduce some points about *the nature of individuality, and the means of living truthfully, and the constitution of desire, and the origin of evil*, and one or two other things, about which you showed an eager interest, but which were quickly put to rest - or rather - mercilessly trammelled - by the philistine contingent in our midst. Since you have graciously accepted the offer of my arm, permit me further to suggest a place superior to any thoroughfare or public park toward which to bend our steps, where I know positively that we will find ample shade and seclusion, and as little noise as can be sought for in a town such as this, on a day such as today. It happens that I know this place extraordinarily well, as it is, I confess, almost a second home to me, so often have I spent whole days - sometimes whole nights! - wandering its tidy paths and reclined upon its benches. You will find no better environment for the stimulation of your thoughts, therefore -

Follow me to the graveyard, and let us speak of what we see....

In a world obsessed with progress - with stuffing the past away into museum vaults behind ticket booths - the graveyard stands as an obstinate and unavoidable indicator of an opposite tendency: a desire to preserve rather than eradicate that which is passed. In the case of the graveyard, however, that which is passed is not anything of momentous public record, like the site of a battle or a statue erected in honor of some historical personage in the place of his birth. A graveyard is a public representation of private lives and private memories and a sort of emblem of the sacredness of the individual or of individuality itself. One may enter a graveyard in which one or several persons he has known are interred, and, pausing at his friends'

or relations' graves, reflect upon his personal memories of their individual lives. At the same time, however, he will be entirely oblivious to the recollections that the acres and acres of monuments surrounding those he knows are meant to arouse for those to whom the rest are familiar. They are, as it were, *mute* to him - incapable of suggesting anything other than death itself - for indeed, they were to his experience never alive. However much we mean for the monuments we erect for our own kin to perpetuate them in memory, to keep them in a sense alive, all they can do for the stranger - for the unknowing interloper in their midst - is confirm for him that they are dead, and that death is everywhere and in everyone. As the marker fades and cracks and becomes stained with moss and the dun obscuring stains of time, and as those who knew the buried die and are buried in their turn, each grave becomes less and less a symbol of individuality and more and more the symbol of anonymity: not merely the loss of the individual, in other words, but the inescapable loss of individuality itself. They pass then fully out of life - out of living concern - and in joining the irregular yet uniform landscape of weatherbeaten rubble truly become *the dead*.

So the memory vanishes but the monument remains, and the death remains in the monument. What does this mean for our claim - our sacred claim, made sacred by the monument - of individuality? If the only thing that makes you individual is the knowledge that others have of you, then how is it that you are to be called an individual at all? Are you not in actuality simply a *figment* of singularity preserved by those by whom your existence is verified and your significance, if you have any, established? Kierkegaard asked this question and came away with the conclusion that *we are all only individual in the sight of God*. He remarked thus, in one of his journals if my memory does not misdirect me, that he would like his gravestone to be inscribed not with his name - which served him only in life - but with, "Here Lies THE INDIVIDUAL" - which is what God would know him as in death. For only the One who is Absolutely Other and Truly Outside, Kierkegaard reasoned, can know you as a singular and undivided whole. Our fellow man, whatever his degree of intimacy with us, can only know us as fragments - even as the tombstone is a fragment hewn from a larger block; even as the two dates on either side of the dash are but particles of time enclosing many unspecified occasions and occurrences.

I have no qualm with the venerable Dane's estimation of true individuality. I know very well that the persons who know me very well in fact know me very little. I try, when I have the strength to, to have faith in a God who knows me as I could never hope to know myself, and, I hope, finds more good in me than I find in myself - though I fear that the opposite is true. As much as I dread the thought that someone will someday pass my grave and know me as nothing more than a name, which will again someday be passed by without any intelligible trace even of this remaining, I dread even more the possibility that there is anyone - even the Deity - who knows me so completely that there is no opportunity for distortion, erasure, or the smoothing-over of time. For in this case, I would be timeless, and all that I have done to work and will my way into being what I now am would be washed away in futility. It would be no different if I had been born and died on the same day: my fundamental self, which God created and already knows in its fulness, would be unchanged. To know myself, then, as God alone knows me, would be to know no one - a formless thing of inchoate spirit, comprehensible only to its creator.

This tastes, of course, of a rather puritanical fatalism. One could argue without fear of censure that we are placed in time and permitted to live out our allotted durations so that we could, through faith, become the persons that God intended for us to be. But if this is true, it could only mean that our sole responsibility in life is to cease all efforts at defining ourselves, ignore all efforts of others to define us, and rise (or descend) to the task of discovering who we were when we were born, and who God knew us to be even before then. But this only returns me to my original quandary, for to revert thus to our original selves, to reject the accretions of time, experience, and human influence, would be to lose ourselves entirely. It would be better to have never been born - to have remained incorrupt and never suffered the prospect of being condemned for the failings of our maturation and thereafter. So it is that we have every right and every cause to beseech our creator, as Job did in his righteous despair, "Why did you let me be born? Why did you not take me while I was yet in my mother's womb - before I knew suffering, before I knew sin?"

Follow me to this gravestone and let us speak of what we see....

Here is a noble monument, nearly as tall as a man, surmounted by the image of an urn, and still bearing the inscription, though faintly:

WILLIE.
Son of Samuel R. &
Mary S. Rappleyea
DIED
March 23, 1851
Aged 5 yrs 1 mo.

Making our way around this stone, we find that each of the other three faces of it are marked with the names of little Willie's family: his mother, who died at 58 years, his father, who died at 63 years, and what we can assume was his brother, Wesley, who died aged 43. Now we must ask ourselves, which of these was the more fortunate - therefore the happier - individual? (Which one, indeed was the *more individual*?) Must it not have been Samuel, who lived the longest, and presumably, lived the most? But here is a man who witnessed his first son pass into eternity scarcely before his infancy was concluded, and then his wife, who died indeed only one month before his own sorrows were at last relieved in death. The child, given hardly an opportunity to sniff at life's banquet, was likewise left with little opportunity to gorge himself upon its miseries. He was given just enough, it seems, to become a "little individual" - and therefore a little bit wicked, a little bit willful, a little bit perverse. But he, being only five years separated from his *original self*, fared better by far than his brother, who had four decades in which to grow corrupted, and for all of life's innocent joys (if these exist) to grow insipid, and its gross delights monotonous, and its innumerable griefs redundant and dull. And yet even he could be congratulated for dying young! And more mercifully, still a bachelor!

Though we may amuse ourselves thus for hours, conjecturing upon these ancient remnants of human travail, as if they were in the least way familiar to us, we cannot by any effort return to them their lost individuality. We can only pray that they had rediscovered it before the sweeping hand of God groped down into the darkness of time and rediscovered *them*.

You ask me what I seek among these eroded emblems of loss - these tears frozen into granite. I reply, What else is there for man to seek? I seek the truth. And you take your hand and, laying it upon my breast, say, Here, here is truth! Life as we are living it now is the only truth we can know, or will ever know! Placidly I remove your hand and lay it instead upon the face of a stunted, almost featureless headstone nearby, and I say, No - there is yet something truer. This homely slab was here in this spot, this corner of the cemetery a hundred years before we were born, and when we die, it will be here still for a hundred years to come. How is that not truth? So, you rejoin, truth is stone? Truth is earth? Truth is matter? *DEATH*, I cry, truth is *death* - and we know it better than anything, and can be more certain of it than any sensation, any emotion, any belief or hope or sentiment. Only through death can we hope to know ourselves, and even then what we know is not *truth*.

You recoil in affected disgust and sigh out a river of weariness. The sun is shining, you say, and the birds make an orgy of the branches. You have brought me to the graveyard: must we now both see death and speak of it? Can we not lie here in the shade of the ash and listen to our heartbeats and speak of tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that, and the tomorrow after that?

But we cannot, I reply, for no such thing exists. Tomorrow is not and will never be - even if the sun were to lodge itself overhead and remain there for a week, there would be no tomorrow. We have only today - can speak only of today - and while we speak of it, observe that it, like us, is dying. I have heard it said that "Death happens in the midst of life." But I assert, on the contrary, that life happens in the midst of death - that it is the transient that must give way to the constant, the changing to the unchanging. I have brought you to the graveyard because it is the calmest place I know. Beyond lies the road - you cannot flee the sound of it - and all about the cemetery's circumference, the neighborhood, with its dogs, and its children, and its residents about their summer business with all their summer machines. But here, in the graveyard, we speak in temperate voices and think on timeless things and share the blessed silence of the forgotten and the truly dead. For we are death's novices, death's apprentices, and all we can hope to learn of the truth,

we must petition death to teach us. Here I see a lean little marker, etched only with initials - an infant, to be sure - reclined as if exhausted by its short store of struggling breaths against the slightly taller, slightly broader gravestone of a girl four years old. How dear it seems, this simulated siblinghood here among the departed! It is, of course, only an illusion born of habit, to perceive in cold objects what we observe among ourselves. But is there yet truth to be found in it - a truth, even, only *suggested* in the living but *confirmed* at last in death?

I have explained how gravestones are in essence containers and preservers of memory, the purpose of which is to establish in stone the reality and identities of those whose identities are indeed only perpetuated for as long as those who helped to create them survive. If there were any formal acceptance of the belief that God alone knows the dead, then no gravestone would exist, because God needs no such aid in remembering his own! What we see, then, in a tombstone is a certain concern on the part of those by whose instructions it was commissioned, and under whose direction it was made, that the memory - the identity - of the one whose corporal form lies under it be not lost along with the form itself. It may even be said that it is one form that follows the other, and as long as it stands for those familiar with the departed, the identity of the departed remains intact, and indeed, still subject to such alterations of time as act upon the memories of the survivors. Thus we see that one's individuality is in no inconsiderable part owed to the concern that others have for maintaining it, even after the point at which we are no longer present to maintain it ourselves. Rather than having any sort of biography engraved upon the monument, though, we see instead - in the case, at least of those multitudes whose very obscurity would make a biography most useful - simple statements of *relationship*: husband, wife, son, daughter, mother, father, etc. So we see that, far from exercising any influence over what we are to ourselves or to others, it is ultimately those who can identify us *only in relationship to themselves* that control our insignificant claim to immortality. This means that the graveyard is not so much an attempt to preserve or perpetuate the individuality of those buried within, but rather it is an attempt to immortalize the relationships - the comparative strains of superficial identity - represented by the deceased. The prominent placement of surnames on the largest and most imposing of the monuments attests to this.

Ironically, it seems that on the earthly plane as in the heavenly, it matters more who you were born as than who you willed yourself to become!

Follow me farther into the graveyard, and allow me to better explain myself....

I say that we cannot speak of tomorrow, for there is no such thing; likewise do I say that there is no looking past death, for indeed, there is nothing else to see. Therefore must we cease thinking about tomorrow and devote ourselves instead to thinking about death: to “have death’s face ever before us.” Only by doing this may we be assured that we are alive. To fully live is to be held lovingly in the embrace of death, and to let death lead in the perpetual dance that carries you from your first breath to your last, knowing that with each breath you breathe and with each step you take, you are dancing closer - always ever-closer - to the welcoming bosom of death.

Of all the illusions into the midst of which we are plunged from the day of our birth, “tomorrow” is the most invidious - the source of all that corrupts. It is because of tomorrow that we permit ourselves to suffer today, and it is the anticipation of another day that prevents us from entering entirely into the suffering of today, so that nothing is real as long as the falsehood of “tomorrow” is entertained. “Tomorrow” is the invention of bankers and insurance agents, of universities and capitalists, of usurers and swindlers and politicians and every such fiend. It is because we live for the future that the present is intolerable, unbeautiful, and cheap. I tell you, every day lived for the sake of the day to come is a day idolatrously squandered in the service of a lie: for how can you take what is and offer it up to what is not? We must think not of tomorrow, but of *eternity*, and to think of eternity, we must think of death.

This is why the graveyard, while being planted in service to an illusion, is nevertheless the home of truth; for while the great fallacies of time and identity are emblazoned upon every stone, each stone is as it were merely a proxy or substitute for the thing placed beneath it, for which eternity is the only reality. God forbid that the headstone accomplish its tacitly intended purpose of bounding the fortunate

dead not only to their own time, in which they were at least *regarded* as individuals, but to the subsequent ages, in which they are nothing but melancholy reminders of the triumph of decay! Beneath the gravestone is the corpse, which rots and is returned to the dust, leaving only a faceless, characterless, and anonymous skeleton behind. So it is that we are presented with the sight of a skull and do not see the individual whose fleshly face it once wore, but simply *death* - the universal symbol of death and all the dead. Regardless of how great a tombstone one has or the greatness of the name upon it, one dies and becomes death; one leaves the illusion of time and enters into eternity.

But, you ask, if perchance tomorrow *does* come, would it not be better for us if we had in some wise prepared for it? Or are we simply to “eat, drink, and be merry,” daily destituting ourselves with the assumption that death is at hand? Are we not to plan? Are we not to hope? Are we not to provide for ourselves and those that come after us?

And I answer, No, let it not be, “eat, drink, and be merry,” but rather let it be, “eat, drink, and be *ready*, for today you are called to death.” Think of the trivial and senseless things we do when we are living in expectation of tomorrow. Think of how we waste ourselves with worry, while ignoring what is necessary for the sake of what is *diverting* - the things we do to “kill time,” as if to stand in petulant and impotent defiance of the thing that is in fact killing us! Some of us, rather than making enough money to supply the needs of today, toil and scheme instead to make enough for a thousand tomorrows, until all our tomorrows are behind us, and we must face death with nothing but money to offer and nothing but greed to recount. Some of us, sure that there will be tomorrows enough to do what is good and necessary later, pass every day in indolence, languor, and self-amusement, until we must face death with nothing but unfulfilled intentions and idle talk to show. Far better it is than either of these to secure what little you need for today to be bearable, and to dedicate yourself to easing the suffering of others, and to the ceaseless contemplation of the death that could at any instant be yours. Better it is to begin and end each day with the utterance, “I am content; I am ready; I have done all that I can.” Let each day be for you an eternity, and each night, a sweet

reminder of death. Only rid yourself of tomorrow, and you will be well and will do no one any injury.

It is easy enough, while we tarry here in the graveyard, to contemplate death and to see it in everything - for here, even the birds and the trees and the creeping things participate in death and make a home of its temples. But how difficult it becomes, when we have left the graveyard and passed into the streets, and among the shops, the rushing cars and the rushing pedestrians, to say not, "I have returned to life," but, "This too is death and all of this is dying." Difficult it may be, but for one who abides in the bosom of death, the living world - the world that thinks only of tomorrow - must be treated gently as a man on his deathbed. It must be whispered to, it must be comforted, from time to time you must take its hand and lightly hold it. But you cannot get up and walk with it, you cannot climb into bed with it, you cannot hold discourse with it as you would with one who is well and not delirious. You must be as one who holds vigil in the night, trimming your candle and keeping your peace. For death is always with you; you are death's and death is yours.

Follow me, then, into the world outside the graveyard, and let us speak of what we see....

Here, where death is the Great Antagonist, the despised Other, the thing most feared, we find that it has also been made a sport of, and held in contempt, and abused as an emblem of evil, depravity, and terror. For some, its name goes superstitiously unspoken, as if it can be summoned by the most unwitting invocation. For others, it is cast off in jest or murmured in malice, irreverently, as if it were a thing of fiction. Murder and tragedy erupt on every screen, as death, and sex, its sibling, are exploited by everyone in search of an audience and a profit, while - again, like sex - becoming more unreal, artificial, and harder to fathom with every successive portrayal. And so are we surrounded by and suffused with the malignant and grotesque mockeries of our sweetest love, our first companion and final friend, as death is painted like a prostitute and paraded through the marketplaces - garish and exotic despite its being universal, ubiquitous, and unfailingly familiar.

And yet everything death actually touches it makes sacred. Even beyond the graveyard, we see childish memorials erected where fatal collisions or senseless massacres have been, and so a strip of roadside or a patch of schoolyard is, for a time, elevated above profanity by the unexpected visitation of death. Wherever battles have been fought or atrocities committed, stones and placards spring up to commemorate the loss of life, like the shrines that once appeared on the graves of martyrs. While some of these non-sepulchral memorials, these spontaneous cenotaphs, prove more enduring than others, what is true of all is that they are intended to preserve onward through time the recollections and presences of persons who have themselves passed out of time and into eternity. Unable to recognize how tormented we are by our awareness of time, we endeavor to bind even what is transcendent with its shackles, while the future evidences of our present losses become little but passing curiosities - or mere examples of architecture - to those who take up our places in time's relentless current.

By this we see again that a memorial, in whomever's honor it is raised, invariably transcends its original purpose, and commemorates only death itself.

You ask, prurient creature that you are, what I meant when I called sex the sibling of death. Of course, death has no true siblings - not even sleep, which, though it carries us into oblivion, still does not inform us to the slightest degree about what death actually is; the two merely share some superficial and coincidental appearances. Speaking first of sex as a biological function meant for bringing forth progeny, we can say that every conception is a kind of addition to death, though in actuality, death, being eternal and constant, can neither be added to or taken away from. And yet, with every new life, death gains a lover - a new form to act upon and through which to make itself manifest. Before life can be, death is, and it is already present in the completed conception, just as it was present in the millions of spermatozoa that perished without finding their mark in their bid to be the fertilizing party. In this we witness how the wastefulness of life is answered by the plenitude of death. And when, in gestation, some aberration appears that would prove painful or fatal to either the foetus or its maternal host, death is merciful in

issuing the doomed little passenger away, so that life in its eagerness and excess can hope for another more profitable return.

It is impossible to think of the womb's lightless chamber without finding in it an analogy - a prefiguration - of the grave, as we find even among the burial sites of peoples who vanished before history could make record of them, in which their corpses were laid on their sides with their knees drawn up against the breast, as if they had merely been deposited back into the womb whence it first emerged. Nor is it altogether mistaken to find in death a kind of mother, for in her arms alone do we find solace that surpasses all else, and in her bosom the final refuge for our tears. Think not that when a babe comes howling and sputtering into the world that it is delivered into the arms of a mother or father, a doctor or midwife; no, before any human hand has ever touched it, death has already visited it and abided with it through the stages of gestation, and ere it received an earthly name, death has pronounced a claim on it that no earthly effort can revoke. So you have heard it said that "we must each pay our debt to death," for indeed, we were death's before we were known by our progenitors, and will be death's when our descendents have forgotten where we were buried.

But it is when sex is divested of its practical, progenitive function and left to roam in the wilds of desire that its peculiar relationship to death becomes most distinct. Freud and his successors found that it was impossible to distinguish the vital instinct for lust-fulfillment and sexual self-actualization without discovering within it a correspondingly morbid impulse toward both the elimination of the other and the annihilation of the self *through* the other. Without granting any credence to the psychoanalysts, for whom this "death-drive" remained an inescapable and inexplicable mystery, it must be said that the Freudians might yet have arrived close to the truth if they had begun from the other side: that is, if they had been able to see death as the central principle of human experience and motivation, and not sex. Well, it is too late for them now. Suffice it to say that the libidinous urge in the human creature is at its most essential a *suicidal* urge - a maelstrom of tightly winding torments and tensions that clamours for release in the form of a violent struggle followed by total quiescence. How often have we heard in stories and songs of love

being a kind of sickness or madness, which only consummation with the beloved can cure? This is just how it is with the truth-seeker, the lover of death: his longing wells and rages within him until at last his benighting angel, his companion from the blackness of the womb, draws him in for the culminating embrace, and in one blinding instant, silences all, resolves all, forgets all. The objects of our lusts are but tawdry carnal substitutes for the end of all desires, which is death.

Thus there are three stages of earthly desire. The first is brutal, devouring, completely selfish and rooted in the biological imperatives of life, and this says, "I love you so much I want to kill you." It is born of nothing but vanity and self-adoration on the part of the subject, for whom the object and the lust he or she engenders become a sort of rival to be overthrown, disarmed, and sacrificed on the altar of a primitive and idolatrous identity. The second originates in gentler, more human and sentimental regions of the heart, and it says, "I love you so much that I would die for you." This is what theologians call agape love - a sympathetic, compassionate, identifying love that aspires to prove itself through sacrifice to the other with which it is absorbed. Finally, the truest and purest form of desire is that which says, "I love you so much that I want to die *with* you." In this the lover has no illusions about the true source and shape of his desire. Knowing his beloved to be desirable only inasmuch as he or she embodies, exemplifies, and re-echoes his ultimate desire for the beauty of death, and knowing likewise that his beloved's desire for him is sprung from the same principle, he sees in her (or him) the perfection of mortal experience, to be exceeded by nothing except the reunion with eternity for which they both have longed. Beyond this threshold love cannot penetrate without itself passing into and becoming death.

So one last time, sweet friend, return with me to the graveyard, and let us speak of what we see....

The summer sun is slow to set, but there are clouds now settling thick about its scorched face, and the wind is lifting the branches inquisitively, as if to ask if all is ready for the advancing storm. As we lay down again at our wonted place beneath the sheltering ash, and separately scan the white roofs of the mausoleums, the sternly militant obelisks, the statues with their folded wings and faces bowed with

grieving, I perceive your eyes aglint with tears, and your breast astir with broken sighs. Are you so sad, say I, taking your hand, after a day so sweetly spent? Your eyes rise to mine, and lingering for a moment, brighten, only to be passed over as if by a shadow, and fall again to the feet of the graves. You answer, You have told me much, my friend, far more than I can in a day digest, much less make answer to, but beautiful as this place is, this talk of death, these forlorn tombs - it's true - they make me sadder and sadder! I'm still alive! I'd like to stay - not here - among the living; I'd like to see another seaside sunrise, and fall asleep upon the sand, and wake to see another still. I'd like to taste the air of a thousand mountaintops and the salt of every sea; I'd like to kiss my slumbering infant's cheeks and feel its warmth pass through me like the secret breath of heaven. Forgive me, friend, if I blaspheme, but whatever death is, let it fly somewhere else today; let it turn its gaze elsewhere, let it think of me not, and I will think not of it, I will speak not its name, I will live and find life among the living!

My friend, I reply, My friend, I am with you! Think not for an instant that the beauty that still exists in the world, despite humanity's most vehement efforts to banish it, escapes me to the slightest degree! I am drunk with it - sometimes I am giddy! But this is precisely what our experience of life and beauty must be, if we are to exchange our enslavement to time for the unboundedness of eternity. Does the world know it is beautiful? Do the clouds assemble of their own accord into the fantastic forms that the human eye finds in them? Do the birds string their chortles into symphonies and airs? Do the deer compose tragedies at the falling of a hunted stag? Life simply lives, oblivious to the wonders that we descry in and contrive from its workings, be they majestic or obscene. What distinction is there, after all, between a lion and a lobster, a chrysanthemum and a cactus, a parasite and a platypus? It is we alone who assign to one lifeform beauty and another repulsiveness, just as it is we alone who find misery where another finds contentment, and bliss where another finds boredom. All this we do because the immortality in us must strive to find expression in the things of mortal experience. From this is born all art, be it exquisite or vulgar; from this, all happiness, discontent, charity and meanness. We are big souls in a small world, and we are all a little mad. It is only when our eternal selves reach out to embrace something of

sublimity and grandeur - a setting sun, a mighty squall, a peak diademed with clouds or a hillside swimming with oceans of heather - only then do we feel that the world, in all its greatness, is yet not great enough to give our souls berth - only then do we weep for the insufficiency of the words by which our perceptions are put into order. Having already the foretaste and foreknowledge of the eternal buried deep within our bosoms like an undiscovered onyx, we are delivered nonetheless into the temporal and then told that *we must die*. It is a hard thing, a hard thing to know that you must die - except that you know that it is nothing, and that nothing you find here is anything compared to death.

But after all, what is death? It is a question impossible to escape but futile to pursue. The laborer knows it as the end of his labors; the stockbroker knows it as the end of his worth; the poet knows it as the door to posterity; the widower knows it as the source of all sorrow and of all consolation. But we each must come to know it, and to know that it is with us, and in us, and of us, and that it is indeed ourselves. Between you, and this headstone, and the cadaver beneath the headstone, there is no difference. They are altogether death, and death is altogether us.

Look a little way yonder, friend - do you not see in the crepuscular light that great section full of white, identical crosses and bright, billowing flags? There lie the accumulate dead of three or four wars, from every category of martial service, from colonels to cavalymen, from sailors to shock-troops - as regimented and indistinguishable as they were in their marching lines, and reposing under the same brazen banner to which they first swore and then forfeited their lives. How foolhardy it now seems, in the gathering splendors of this dying day, to sell yourself as provender for something so impersonal as a set of boundary lines, or as abstract and effectively meaningless as the idea of "freedom!" Yet I tell you that there is no more human way to die, and no more human way to live than by making other humans die in the same way. Patriotism and bellicosity, fanaticism and rapaciousness, though they express themselves in atrocity, carnage, and devastation, are but further evidence of what distempers may occur when an infinite soul is contained within a finite frame, upon a finite world, beset by finite frailties, strifes, and jealousies. We are creatures of excess, we humans, because we are caged, and

we are crazed, and we are red-eyed and frothing with *nostalgia for eternity*. So with every passing century, every passing decade, we in our insanity, our unappeasable lust for death, contrive ever more effective and cataclysmic ways of sending thousands - yea, millions! - anonymously to their vast and ash-strewn graves. And every century, every decade, there are more and more born - more than our ancestors could have conceived possible - more little corpses-in-waiting, raised in poverty and degradation and indignant despair, waiting for the hand that will give them a gun and the flag that will give an end to their hunger, a scapegoat for their hatred, and a motive for their madness - the madness that is man.

So why not now? My companion, my delight - why not now, as the blue-tipped stars wake blinking beneath their quilts of creeping clouds? Arise with me and let's go deep, to swim out far amidst these graves, to the dark heart of this dead place, and dance like the wanton lunatics we are! O holy moon! O endless night! Receive our glee, our desolate rejoicing - receive our blood, poisoned with life!

Follow me into the graveyard!

-DTT

Union Cemetery

Hyde Park, NY

12-13 July 2014



EPILOGUE

Follow me to the graveyard, and let us speak of what we see....

A necropolis of the Faithful, a garden in which the dead are planted and yield nothing but a sprawling and sullen tribute to the triumph of death. And yet if there were no belief in eternity, perhaps we would not be so anxious to erect what are meant to be permanent memorials to our dead, on the faces of which the testaments of their very transience are inscribed. Perhaps we suppose that when the dead rise from their graves, they will need to examine their own headstones, to tell them who they once were, to what people they belonged, and how long it has been since they have fallen asleep.

The power of the graveyard lies in its silence. No matter how vast or how modest - whether it be the home of ten thousand human corpses or of fifteen - we cannot enter into it without the hush falling upon us, with the instinctual feeling that while we are here, we must whisper. The idea - the merest thought - of raising a cry in such a place (unless it be a cry of true mourning) halts before the reproofs of the conscience. But among the gravestones, there is nevertheless a kind of constant clamour. There they stand, decade after decade, chattering out for all who pass by (fewer, alas, every year) their names, the duration of their mortal lives, the names of those to whom they were married, and for some, a little snatch of poetry to expand upon their virtues or the bereftness of those condemned to live on in their absence. The place is a riot of marble, limestone, and granite - some polished smooth, so that one can see one's own feet reflected in it as one passes, some dull in hue, but resisting time nobly and remaining legible from afar, and a great many worn almost beyond hope of recognition, slumbering amid the general din beneath blankets of adumbrating moss.

There is, among the graves, a pandemonium of forms, and the most endearing of cemeteries are those that seem to have sprung up of necessity, spilling out in all directions at the steady speed of death, markers and mausoleums landing wheresoever they would. We find in such places an abundance of tablets, some of the plainest design, others dignifying their humble shape with a flourish of handicraft - a death's head, or a winged cherub, or a willow tree, or an urn. Other stones are fashioned after a column or pillar, sculpted so as to appear broken, signifying - one supposes - the perceived collapse of the world following their emancipation from life. Many are pyramid-peaked obelisks, pilfered from the Egyptian sun cult and denoting a person of high social standing: the taller the obelisk, the higher the stature of him who, on taking death's hand, was made the equal of all mankind, and the equal of death itself.

All this proves nothing but the triumph of death over the proud and the humble, the mighty and the low - the grief-stricken statue no greater or less a curiosity to the aimless interloper than the slab snapped in half and left to lean against its own base, decapitated but unperturbed. Over all the silence reigns, the silence of the bone-filled earth echoing the ineffable silence of the star-filled sky, the one silently receiving our somber meditations, the other our disheartened orisons, as a raven drops down on the head of a cross and croaks its inscrutable inquiry.

God has departed and given us over to death. The truest of true lovers, He died not for us, but *with* us - an eschatological suicide-pact, true love for true love, true death for true death. In the silence of the heavens one hears the immortal indignation of the angels, and in the silence of the cemetery, man's outrage at his own impermanence. We are given, let us remember, but one death to die: like a rifle with a single ball of shot, let us take care to aim it well. Let us be precise. It is our greatest gift, our crowning concern, our only death.

END

